



JADE II. PRE-ISLAMIC IRANIAN JADES

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An extremely small range of pre-Islamic Iranian jades have thus far been published, despite the very ancient employment of jade in eastern Iran. The overwhelming majority consists of a conjugation of sword pommel, quillon, and scabbard slide types. They are associated with the development of the long iron sword (Trousdale 1975, p. [iv]) and are thought to have originated with a northern nomadic group, most likely the Yuezhi (Yüeh Chih; see [KUSHAN DYNASTIES](#)), who were well-established in China by the 5th century BCE (Trousdale, 1975, pp. 110-13; and on early developments in China, Trousdale, 1975, pp. 11-70). Between the 2nd century BCE and the 5th century CE, this sword type and its associated accoutrements spread to West Asia and Europe in association with the dominance of the Kushans and their immediate predecessors and successors (Trousdale, 1969; 1975; 1988). These jade scabbard slides, quillons, and pommels are important, because they demonstrate the widespread employment of jade and its substitutes, and yet in the literature on non-Chinese jades they tend to be ignored as a phenomenon apart. The wearers of these swords and accoutrements would have been aware of jade's appropriateness for such mounts due to its great toughness. But, apart from its aesthetic appeal, jade's purported apotropaic properties



(especially its ability to assure its wearer of victory in combat) would also explain part of its popularity among those who could afford it. Ralph Pinder-Wilson (in Pinder-Wilson and Watson, p. 19; 1976, p. 122—for his role in jade scholarship, see Skelton 1991, p. 369, n. 15) was the first to point out jade's reputation for such qualities, based on Biruni's statement (p. 198) that these properties were an important reason for the wearing of jade fittings by the "Turks." Extant scabbard slides of softer and more brittle stones (e.g., lapis lazuli, rock crystal), as well as wood, suggest that the toughness of jade was not an essential requirement for this function. A number of other types of jade fittings on the warrior and his horse would often accompany the weapon's mounts.

Two vessels found in Iran in the 20th century had seemed potentially very important for the history of ancient Iranian jades, though at this point neither object can be accepted as such. The first is a circular, flattish dish with a wide, flat rim, found near Shiraz at Qaṣr-e Abu Naṣr and preserved in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran (2.2 x 21.1 cm, inv. no. 2512). It may or may not be of jade; it has been described as jasper by both Upton (1934, p. 21 and fig. 27, showing the bottom) and Wilkinson (1965, p. 344 and figs. 19 and 20, illustrating both top and bottom; for color photo of top, see Curtis, 2005, p. 130 no. 147); the latter work characterizes it as of "dark speckled stone." The main basis for these authors' "Achaemenian" attribution is its alleged closeness to the stone vessels excavated in the Treasury at Persepolis and elsewhere (for the Persepolis pieces, see Schmidt, 1957, pls. 59-61; cf. Wilkinson, 1965, p. 344). Although several of the Persepolis pieces exhibit a general similarity to the Qaṣr-e Abu Naṣr plate, none has in fact the same profile, and until careful measurements and a mineralogical examination are made available, the piece remains in limbo. While Melikian-Chirvani (1997/2000, p. 135) seems to be of two minds regarding the date when the vessel was made, research by the present contributor suggests that the Achaemenid attribution is unlikely to be correct and that the piece is probably of the 10th century. This will be taken up again below in connection with the discussion of the charger in the Cleveland Museum of Art ([PLATE V](#)).

The second vessel which has been put forward as an ancient Iranian jade is a small elliptical dish excavated at Susa (see [SUSA v. THE SASANIAN PERIOD](#)), and exhibited for many years at the Louvre Museum (inv. no. Sb 3792; l. 82, w. 42, ht. 15 mm). Specialists have placed it in the Sasanian era between the 4th and 7th centuries—the later end of this range is most likely—and identified its



material as jadeite. The dish belongs to a group of hardstone vessels of the same shape and identical or related decoration (for its early comparison to a similar rock crystal piece, see Christie's London, 5 July 1995, lot 118). While Melikian-Chirvani (1997/2000, pp. 135-36, figs. 1-2), suggests nephrite as its material, this contributor's personal examination (Paris, 30 June 2006) has revealed that the vessel was carved from bloodstone, a variety of fine, dark green cryptocrystalline quartz with red spots or larger blotches (sometimes termed heliotrope), which was a popular material for hardstone carvings in the ancient world. On the Louvre Museum piece, the spots are tiny, and so the confusion with jade is an understandable mistake. Despite the occasional superficial resemblance to jade, however, bloodstone is entirely different in composition, crystal structure, fracture, and aspect from both jadeite and nephrite. Moreover, before the 18th century, nephrite was the jade of the entire Old World, jadeite playing no part (excluding certain Neolithic instances of tools and weapons).

Thus the first of the two most famous objects claimed to be ancient Iranian jades is possibly not jade and was probably made in the medieval eastern Islamic world, and the second is not jade at all. But there are other ancient Iranian jades which are properly so characterized, in addition to the iron sword ensemble discussed above. The earliest hitherto published piece known to the author has been described as an edged-weapon pommel (Litvinskiy and Pichikiyan, p. 163 pl. XII; *Oxus*, no. 14). It was found in the Takht-i Sangin temple deposit on the right bank of the Oxus river (see [ĀMU DARYĀ](#)), near the site where the famous Oxus Treasure was found. Here, the head of a wolf or wolf-dragon is rendered in a highly abstract, Steppe art manner, and has inlay which apparently consists of lapis lazuli and glass (shell?). The piece is possibly from the 2nd century BCE.

Not much later, but very different in handling, is a dragon's head (Keene, 2004, pp. 196-97, fig. 1), putatively from Afghanistan. The subject embodies local and Steppe traditions, but, in contrast with the Takht-i Sangin piece, the artistic style is dominated by the anatomical verisimilitude brought to the area by the Greeks of the 4th to 2nd centuries BCE (see [GREECE. viii. GREEK ART IN CENTRAL ASIA, AFGHANISTAN, AND NORTHWEST INDIA](#)). The Greek style (see esp. [PLATE I](#)) persisted for centuries, spreading, in one form or another over much of Asia, revolutionizing the arts from Syria to China, a phenomenon that will be further discussed below.

Another published ancient Iranian jade is a plaque incusely carved on both



sides (Rtveladze). Although the object is not finely made (figs.1-3), its origin in modern-day Uzbekistan reinforces the likelihood of the concentration of the industry in the region from ancient times. One side shows a ruler's bust of the Bactrian Greek type, and the other the Bull-King Gopatshah (see [GŌBADŠĀH](#)). It has been placed "in North-Eastern Bactria at the juncture of the Yueh-chi and Early Kushan periods" (Rtveladze, p. 294), and dated between the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE (p. 299). This attribution is argued in great detail (using particularly numismatic evidence), and other early nephrite pieces found in Central Asia are cited in an excursus which forms part of Rtveladze's paper. He considers an uncharacterized item from Uzbekistan (Aibek Museum of the History of the Peoples of Uzbekistan, inv. no. 259/666) to date to the 1st millennium BCE and regards it as "probably the earliest known article fashioned from nephrite to have been found in Central Asia" (p. 304). A seal from Farḡāna has been attributed to the Achaemenid period (p. 305). A small bowl from Kirghizia is said to date from between the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century CE (p. 305). A dagger quillon-block and jade scabbard slide, excavated together in the Samarqand region, belong to the sword type which was discussed above, and are dated between the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE (p. 305).